CC BY SA

dīn 1/2018

Mukhtār and the Mahdī: A Critical Inquiry into the Sources

Av Torsten Hylén

Begreppet *al-mahdī* är grundläggande i shīʿitisk islam. Det betyder ordagrant "den rättledde". I den shīʿitiska tolvsekten har ordet kommit att beteckna den dolde Imamen som en dag ska återkomma för att rädda sina anhängare och återställa rättvisa på jorden – en slags messiasgestalt. Det råder nära konsensus bland forskare som sysslar med tidig islam om att den som först använde ordet *al-mahdī* i dess eskatologiska betydelse var den shīʿitiske rebelledaren al-Mukhtār (d. 686), när han tillämpade det på Muḥammad b. al-Ḥanafiyya, en son till ʿAlī. I föreliggande studie ifrågasätter jag denna uppfattning, och argumenterar för att det visserligen kan beläggas att Mukhtār använde titeln *al-mahdī* för Ibn al-Ḥanafiyya, men inte att han använde den i en messiansk bemärkelse. Den betydelsen kan inte beläggas förrän strax efter hans död. Avslutningsvis gör jag gällande att denna fråga är metodologiskt snarare än historiskt viktig.

Nyckelord: Islam, Shiʿa, Mukhtar, mahdi, eskatologi

Introduction

The concept of *al-mahdī* is one of the most important theological ideas in Shīʿism.[1] Its literary meaning is 'the rightly guided', and this is how it was probably used in the first decades after the Prophet Muḥammad. In Twelver Shīʿism it has come to denote the hidden Imam who will

[1] This study is dedicated to my colleague, friend, and mentor Håkan Rydving, who more than anyone else has taught me how important it is to be theoretically and methodologically stringent in scholarly work.

CC BY SA

one day return to redeem his followers and restore justice on Earth, and in that sense it is akin to the Christian idea of the Messiah.[2] Although the concept exists also in Sunni Islam, it does not have the same dignity there. Among scholars of early Islam there is near consensus on the view that the transition of the meaning of the concept *al-mahdī* from its literal meaning of 'the rightly guided' to an eschatological redeemer occurred with the Shīʿite rebel leader al-Mukhtār (d. 686)[3] when he applied it to Muḥammad b. al-Ḥanafiyya, a son of ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib. In the present study, I will contest that view. I will hold that, while it can be established from the sources that Mukhtār probably spoke of Ibn al-Ḥanafiyya as *al-mahdī*, they do not support his use of this title in a messianic sense. Neither do the sources support that he did *not* use it in this way, but in my view this eschatological meaning can only be verified at a slightly later stage in the development of the group that emerged around and after him. Towards the end of the study, I will argue that the methodological significance of this issue is at least as important as the historical one.

The context of Mukhtār

ʿAlī b. Abī Tālib (d. 661), the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muḥammad, had a very special position in the minds of many of his followers. What united the early Shīʿites[4] was the idea that ʿAlī was the rightful successor, the legatee (Ar. *wasī*) of the Prophet. The Shīʿites were also in constant opposition to other contestants for political power, in particular the Umayyads, who were regarded as usurpers. It seems clear that very early on – probably already during his lifetime – some groups had a considerably higher esteem for ʿAlī than as a mere political

2 In the following, I use the terms 'Messiah' and 'messianic' in this eschatological sense. I do not include Judaeo-Christian notions of the anointed king.

3 Dates and years are given only according to the Gregorian calendar.

4 In this context I use the term 'Shiʿites' for the sake of convenience, although the sprawling movement had not yet crystallised and adopted many of the tenets that later Shīʿism is famous for.

cc BY SA

leader, regarding him as what Amir-Moezzi calls 'a semi-legendary figure of heroic and even sacred dimensions' (2014:44). This veneration of him was often referred to as *dīn ʿAlī*, 'the religion of ʿAlī' (2014). Furthermore, immediately after his murder in 661, some Shīʿites, in particular the group that came to be called the Sabaʾiyya, claimed that he had not died or expected him to return from death (Anthony, 2012:313–317; al-Qadi, 1976:300).[5] After ʿAlī's death, his eldest son Ḥasan renounced his claim to political power in favour of the Umayyad caliph Muʿāwiya. Ḥasan passed away in 670, and when Muʿāwiya too died a few years later, ʿAlī's second son, Ḥusayn, refused to give his pledge of allegiance to the new Umayyad caliph, Yazīd b. Muʿāwiya. Ḥusayn was invited to Kufa by the Shīʿites there in order to lead them in an insurrection against the Umayyad governor in the town. At Karbala, on his way from Mecca to Kufa, he was intercepted by an army dispatched by the governor ʿUbaydallāh b. Ziyād, and killed in 680 CE. The political situation among the Believers[6] became increasingly unstable at this time. From Mecca, the aristocrat ʿAbdallāh b. al-Zubayr conquered all of the Hijaz, southern Iraq, and the western areas of Iran. He claimed the caliphate for himself and installed governors in the important towns of his empire, including Kufa. Thus for about a decade (683–692) there were two caliphs competing for power over the entire region: one in the south with Ibn al-Zubayr as Caliph in Mecca, and one in the north, where members of the Umayyad family in Damascus claimed authority for themselves (Hawting, 2000:46–57; Robinson, 2005:35–39).

It is now commonly accepted that in the period between the life of the Prophet Muḥammad and the beginning of the eighth century, apocalyptic ideas – that is, ideas about the imminent end of the world

[5] For a discussion of the doctrine of *rajʿa* (returning from the dead) in early Shīʿism, see e.g. van Ess (1991–1997:Vol. I, 285–287, 290–298).

[6] I follow Fred M. Donner (2010) who convincingly argues that the terms *islām* and *muslim* were not used to name a religious group and its adherents until the beginning of the eighth century CE. Although the change was gradual, before that time, a person who followed the teachings of Muhammad was normally called Believer (*muʾmin*). See also Shoemaker (2012:esp. 199–218).

CC BY SA

and the signs preceding it – flourished in this part of the world (see e.g. Amir-Moezzi, 2016; Anthony, 2012:224–225; Crone, 2004:75–80; Donner, 2010:78–82; Shoemaker, 2012:158–196). In some groups, notably those that held ʿAlī in high esteem, such ideas were very prominent. Above I have mentioned the early Shīʿite group called the Sabaʾiyya and their idea that ʿAlī was not dead but would return and restore justice on Earth, a notion that had obvious messianic overtones (Amir-Moezzi, 2016:44–45; Anthony, 2012:195–225). Several of these ideas were common to Jewish, Christian, and other apocalyptic thought at the time and had been appropriated and adapted by the Sabaʾiyya movement. Thus ideas that can be called 'messianic' were associated with ʿAlī from a very early period, and although many Shīʿites objected to them, at least in their more extreme forms as can be seen from the sources, they were quite widespread.[7]

In 685, al-Mukhtār b. Abī ʿUbayd al-Thaqafi – the main focus of the present study – rose to power in Kufa as the most prominent political leader of the Shīʿites.[8] The early sources generally regard him with great suspicion, often describing him as a political opportunist more interested in power than in adhering to political or religious conviction. Mukhtār claimed to have been sent by a third son of ʿAlī, Muḥammad b. al-Ḥanafiyya. Ibn al-Ḥanafiyya was ʿAlī's son, not (like Ḥasan and Ḥusayn) with Fāṭima the daughter of the Prophet, but with a slave woman from the tribe of Ḥanifa; hence his appellation Ibn al-Ḥanafiyya ('the son of the Ḥanafī woman'). He seems to have been very hesitant, if not outright negative, about being associated with Mukhtār. The latter, however, called Ibn al-Ḥanafiyya *al-mahdī*, 'the rightly guided'. He gathered around him a large number of Shīʿites, and called the people to avenge the blood of the family of the Prophet, in particular of Ḥusayn. He was able to win over the Arab nobleman Ibrāhīm b. al-Ashtar by producing a letter that he alleged was written by the *mahdī* Ibn al-

[7] See Amir-Moezzi (2016) for a very interesting study of the messiahship of ʿAlī in early Shiʿism.

[8] For more comprehensive summaries of the life and career of Mukhtār as given in the sources, see e.g. Dixon (1971:25–81); Tucker (2008:19–33).

CC BY SA

Ḥanafiyya. Ibn al-Ashtar became one of Mukhtār's most successful commanders, and the movement then managed to oust Ibn al-Zubayr's governor in Kufa. The chronology of the following events is unclear, as the sources differ, but they all agree that Mukhtār and his movement took a harsh revenge on the Kufans who had taken part in the battle against Ḥusayn. In 686 Mukhtār sent an army led by Ibn al-Ashtar against a great Umayyad force, and managed to defeat it and kill ʿUbaydallāh b. Ziyād at Naṣībīn in Northern Iraq. Ibn Ziyād had been governor in Kufa when Ḥusayn approached the town, and was responsible for his killing. Finally, a few months later, Mukhtār's movement was crushed by an army loyal to ʿAbdallāh b. al-Zubayr. Kufa was regained and Mukhtār besieged in the palace of the town for some weeks before his killing.

After the death of Mukhtār, his legacy was developed by a group that later heresiographers called the Kaysāniyya.[9] Although it split into several sub-groups with slightly different agendas, their common idea was that Ibn al-Ḥanafiyya had inherited ʿAlī's authority, that he was the *mahdī* with clearly messianic traits, and that he never died, but was concealed from the world and would return one day to restore justice. By the tenth century CE it seems that the group as such was more or less extinct, but many of its ideas continued to live on.

The notion of al-Mahdī

In the Qurʾān, words created from the Arabic root *h-d-y* with the meaning 'right guidance' are very common. Indeed, the concept is 'as central to Islam as salvation is to Christianity' (Arjomand, 1998:250; see also Izutsu, 2002:193–195). The divine revelation in general, as well as the Qurʾān itself, is often called 'the guidance' (*al-hudā*). Two Qurʾānic verses out of the many containing this word will suffice as examples:

[9] The best and most thorough study of the Kaysāniyya is al-Qadi (1974). Shorter studies, which to a large extent build on al-Qadi's work, include Anthony (2013) and Tucker (2008:19–33).

> The month of Ramaḍān, in which the Qurʾān was sent down as a guidance [*hudan*] for the people, and as clear signs of the guidance [*al-hudā*] and the Deliverance (2:185)
> Surely, the guidance of God [*hudā llāh*] – it is the (true) guidance [*huwa l-hudā*], and we have been commanded to submit to the Lord of the worlds' (6:71).[10]

It seems that the Prophet Muḥammad was called 'leader [giving] guidance' (*imām al-hudā*) at least soon after his lifetime (Crone and Hinds, 1986:34, n. 57). Extra-Qurʾānic sources also testify that adherence to the divine guidance was paramount to the earliest Believers, and Fred M. Donner writes: 'Hence the popularity of the phrase, commonly employed in Arabic papyri of the first century AH as a closing salutation, "peace upon those who follow the guidance" (*al-salām ʿalā man ittabaʿa l-hudā*)' (1998:89).

Although the passive participle *mahdī*, 'rightly guided', does not occur in the Qurʾān, it was most likely used very early among the Believers. Most scholars are of the opinion that the term was at first an honorific title given to prophets and leaders and simply meant that the person described by it was divinely guided, but that in earliest times it did not have messianic implications.[11] Crone and Cook, on the other hand, argue that the term *al-mahdī* from the beginning denoted a messianic saviour, an opinion that Crone upheld in later works as well, although perhaps in a less affirmative tone (Crone and Cook, 1977:26–28; Crone, 2004:75).

[10] Throughout, I use Droge's translation of the Qurʾān. Words in parentheses are added by the translator; words in square brackets are added by me.

[11] Goldziher (1981:197, n. 91) has some references, mainly to early Islamic poetry. Other scholars, e.g. Donner (2000, n. 3) and Madelung (1986) refer to Goldziher's note and use the same references (but cf. the quote from Donner below.) A few more references are found in Crone and Hinds (1986:36; for the Prophet as *mahdī* see references in 40, n. 131). In spite of their position on the use of the title *al-mahdī,* several of the scholars that hold this position still regard the early movement of the Believers as essentially eschatological in character.

CC BY SA

When discussing Mukhtār's use of the term, most scholars seem to hold the view that when he referred to Ibn al-Ḥanafiyya as *al-mahdī* it was in the sense of a messiah of some kind. The majority state that he was the first to use it in this sense. Thus Donner writes:

> Mukhtār asserted that Muḥammad Ibn al-Ḥanafiyya was the rightful claimant [to the leadership of the Believers] not only because of his ʿAlid ancestry but also because he was the eschatological redeemer (*mahdi*) whose arrival would vanquish evil and (finally) establish a just regime on Earth. (This is the first recorded instance in which the concept of the *mahdi* is evoked among the Believers.) (2010:183–184)[12]

Likewise, Sean Anthony states that '[a]lthough the term *mahdi* had been utilised by previous movements [...], Moḵtār's revolt marks the first time that the title unambiguously conveyed the sense of an apocalyptic redeemer' (2013).[13] Crone and Cook also maintain that Mukhtār used *al-mahdī* in a messianic sense, though according to them the messianism that had prevailed from the beginning of the movement 'saw a resurgence' with him (1977:96; see also Crone, 2004:77). So, whether the scholars believe that Mukhtār was the first to use term *al-mahdī* in a more eschatological sense when he applied it to Ibn al-Ḥanafiyya, or whether they argue that it was used in this way before Mukhtār, almost all seem to agree that it was in this 'heightened sense'[14] that he used it. One of the very few scholars who are cautious about ascribing an eschatological content to Mukhtār's use of *al-mahdī* is Wadad al-Qadi. She argues that Mukhtār's use of the concept developed during his political activities in Kufa, but that it cannot be proved that he ever used

[12] In this quote Donner seems to say that the term *mahdī* had not been used at all previous to Mukhtār. However, in his earlier article 'La question du messianisme dans l'islam primitif' (2000:para. 5) he maintains that the term had been used earlier, though not in an eschatological sense.

[13] For similar statements, see e.g. Arjomand (1998:250); Hawting (2000:52) ; Madelung (1986); Sachedina (1981:9); Tucker (2008:23–24).

[14] The expression is from Madelung (1986).

CC BY SA

it in a fully messianic sense (1974:122–125). This is something that is only attested later, according to her.

Probing the sources

A methodological problem in the discussions about Mukhtār mentioned above is that many scholars base their views on descriptions from a single source. Many studies, particularly since the 1970s, have demonstrated that early Islamic historiography cannot be taken at face value.[15] Just like present-day historians, medieval Muslim scholars were influenced by the culture and values of their contexts. This affected their views of history and of the events that had occurred. Thus texts from the history of Islam have to be carefully analysed in order to sift out the biases of later historians from the earliest versions (which in themselves, of course, are accounts given from particular perspectives). As previous research has demonstrated, accounts with a historical basis are often merged with traditions of a more spurious character that are religiously or politically biased. Hence the basis in historical fact of each tradition must be investigated in each case. An important criterion when trying to determine whether an event or a phenomenon described in the sources has actually occurred is its attestation in several independent sources.[16] It is important that the sources relate the same thing independently of one another. The story of Mukhtār is indeed related by each of the three early historians al-Balādhurī (d. 892), al-Ṭabarī (d. 923), and Ibn Aʿtham (d. early tenth century)[17]. All three, however,

[15] Among the many works that have been published on this, here are only a few examples that give an overview of the field of Islamic historiography and the modern discussion about it; each of them has many references to other works: Donner (1998, an overview is found in pp. 1–31); Gilliot (2012); Noth and Conrad (1994); Robinson (2003, in particular, Chapter 2).

[16] Within Biblical studies, in particular the study of the historical Jesus, this criterion is perhaps most systematically developed, see e.g. Meier (1991:174–175). In Islamic studies, the *isnād-cum-matn* method developed by Harald Motzki, Gregor Schoeler and others is a good example of the criterion of multiple attestation of sources, although in the meticulous work of this group of scholars several criteria are combined (e.g. Motzki, 1991; Schoeler, 2011). See also Shoemaker (2012:4).

[17] Ibn Aʿtham's date of death has been contested. Compare the arguments of Conrad

CC BY SA

clearly base most of their accounts on the version of the prolific Abū Mikhnaf (d. 774), and thus they cannot normally be regarded as three independent sources.

In contrast, the account of Ibn Saʿd (d. 845) is most likely not based on Abū Mikhnaf's version. Firstly, although the basic structure is similar in the two accounts, there are numerous details in Abū Mikhnaf's version that Ibn Saʿd has not included. Now, this is hardly surprising as the Ibn Saʿd account is much shorter and could be regarded as an abbreviated version of that of Abū Mikhnaf. Moreover, Ibn Saʿd's intention was not to portray Mukhtār, but Ibn al-Ḥanafiyya, and the Kufan rebel leader is included in the account only as far as it suits this particular purpose. Yet there is an important detail in Abū Mikhnaf's account which is absent in Ibn Saʿd, and which is difficult to explain if the latter should be dependent on the former. In Abū Mikhnaf's version, several epithets are applied to Mukhtār to describe his relationship to Ibn al-Ḥanafiyya. Among other things, he is called Ibn al-Ḥanafiyya's 'trustee' (*amīn*) (Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*:509 l. 15, 534 l. 4, 611 l. 10)[18], his 'messenger' (*rasūl*) (Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*:608 l. 12, 610 l. 11), and, most commonly, his 'helper' (*wazīr*) (Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*:509 l. 15, 534 l. 4, 608 l. 11, 611 l. 10, 620 l. 4, 638 l. 5). In Ibn Saʿd's account, al-Mukhtār is called 'trustee' (*amīn*) and 'messenger' (*rasūl*) (Ibn Saʿd, *Tabaqāt*:72 l. 20–21). The epithet 'helper' (*wazīr*) is nowhere found in Ibn Saʿd's account on Mukhtār, however. The frequent use of it in Abū Mikhnaf and its total absence in Ibn Saʿd is in my opinion an indication that the two texts have different origins. Taken by itself it is hardly probative, but there is other evidence, which points in the same direction.

Secondly, Ibn Saʿd includes information not found in Abū Mikhnaf's version, such as a letter to the Kufan Shīʿites which Mukhtār claims is

(2015:90–96) with the more convincing ones of Lindstedt (2017).

[18] In the following, I will normally refer only to the Leiden edition of Ṭabarī's *Tārīkh*. The English translation made by G. Hawting (Ṭabarī, *History*, transl. of ser. II, 598–642) also give the pagination of the Leiden edition in the margin, and it should be easy for any reader to consult the English text even though it is not referred to directly. Only when the translation is quoted do I refer to it. In some of the cases referred to here, verbal forms of the root *ʾ-m-n* are used rather than the noun *amīn*.

written by Ibn al-Ḥanafiyya (1904–1908:V, 72, l. 10–11); Mukhtār's sending of the head of the killed ʿUbaydallāh b. Ziyād to Ibn al-Ḥanafiyya and his relatives, and the positive reaction of ʿAlī b. al-Ḥusayn to ʿUbaydallāh's death (1904–1908:V, 73, l. 5–10); Ibn al-Ḥanafiyya's dislike of the endeavour of Mukhtār, and his request for advice from Ibn ʿAbbās about how to relate to it (1904–1908:V, 73, l. 10–12); and Ibn al-Ḥanafiyya's wish to go to Kufa when he is harassed by Ibn al-Zubayr in Mecca, and Mukhtār's spread of the rumour that Ibn al-Ḥanafiyya is invulnerable and that this will be proven when someone in Kufa tries to kill him (1904–1908:V, 74, l. 13–15). Such differences further strengthen my hypothesis that the two versions are independent of one another.

On the other hand, there is one instance where the close similarities in vocabulary and word order point in a different direction, and could hint at a common source – oral or scriptural – behind them. Both versions describe how some of Mukhtār's men begin to doubt that Ibn al-Ḥanafiyya has actually given Mukhtār authority to speak in his name. They send a delegation to Ibn al-Ḥanafiyya to ask him about this. His reply to the Kufans differs in length and in content between the versions of Abū Mikhnaf and Ibn Saʿd, but in both cases the answer ends with the words: 'I wish God would assist us [against our enemies] through whichever of His creatures He will' (*la-wadadtu anna ʾllāha ʾntaṣara lanā* [*min ʿaduwwinā*] *bi-man shāʾa min khalqihi*) (Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*:607, l. 14; Ibn Saʿd, *Tabaqāt*:V, 72, l. 18, words in brackets are found only in Abū Mikhnaf's version). However, this isolated instance of an almost identical sentence in both texts does not, in my view, indicate anything more than that this particular phrase has been preserved by a tradition used by both historians. As for the rest of the texts, although the basic outline of the story is preserved in both versions, very little of vocabulary, grammatical constructions or word order is the same between the accounts of Abū Mikhnaf's and Ibn Saʿd.[19] Thus, the

[19] In fact, there is another case of similar wording in a phrase. Both historians relate that Mukhtār visited Ibrāhīm b. al-Ashtar in order to persuade him to join the uprising. He was well received by Ibrāhīm, who, in Ibn Saʿd's words 'seated him [Mukhtār] with

cc BY SA

differences between the texts are much weightier than the similarities. Although there might be sections where Ibn Saʿd has used the same source as Abū Mikhnaf, the parallels are far too insignificant to speak of mutual dependence.[20]

In spite of other differences between them, both Abū Mikhnaf and Ibn Saʿd several times and in different contexts state that Mukhtār used the appellation *al-mahdī* for Ibn al-Ḥanafiyya. As this is attested by two independent sources, it is likely that on this point they reflect an historical reality. Against this it may be argued that, since these accounts are transmitted to us by authors who were active a long time after the events themselves, they may rely on traditions which do not necessarily go back to the time of Mukhtār. It is conceivable, for example, that Mukhtār did not use the term *al-mahdī* himself, but that it was created by the Kaysāniyya movement that inherited and developed the legacy of Mukhtār and his companions, and that the occurrence of the term in the texts under investigation here is influenced by traditions about them. However, an important indication that the use of the term actually does go back to Mukhtār himself is found in a poem by the contemporary poet ʿAbdallāh b. Hammām al-Salūlī (d. after 96/715), related by Abū

himself on his cushion' (*ajlasahu maʿahu ʿalā firāshihi*) (*Tabaqāt*:72, l. 21). In the account of Abū Mikhnaf basically the same words are used, but the grammatical construction is slightly different in that Mukhtār rather than Ibrāhīm is here made the subject of the clause: 'al-Mukhtār sat with him on his cushion' (*jalasa l-Mukhtār maʿahu ʿalā firāshihi*) (Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*: 611, l. 17). Such a wording and construction, however, must be considered commonplace in descriptions of the reception of honoured visitors, and this instance of similarity can therefore be regarded as more or less accidental. For an example of similar wording in the story of the Penitents, see Ṭabarī (*Tārīkh*:552, l. 1).

20 I have decided not to count the *akhbār* as separate, independent sources. A *khabar* (pl. *akhbār*) is a short narrative unit preceded by a chain of authorities that have transmitted it. The accounts of historians such as Abū Mikhnaf and Ibn Saʿd normally consist of compilations of such *akhbār*. The *akhbār* have often been heavily edited, however, and in the present context it would be very difficult, if not impossible, to make proper critical studies of each of them in order to trace their redaction history. Thus although I am convinced that there is enough evidence to state that Mukhtār used the term *al-mahdī*, it is extremely difficult to know which of each particular occurrence of the term is historical. On the *akhbār* and their use, see Leder (1992). On the frequent editing of them and the problems of relying on them as they are presented by the historians, see Donner (1998:263–266); Robinson (2003:18–19).

Mikhnaf (and in part also by al-Dināwarī (1888–1912:I, 299)), in which the poet praises Mukhtār and Ibn al-Ḥanafiyya.[21] It is of course possible that poems were forged by later writers, and this probably happened quite often when the author of a poem is said to be an obscure person or someone who is not known as a prominent poet. In the case of famous poets whose works were generally known and spread, such as Ibn Hammām, this is less likely, however, and for that reason I accept this poem as genuine. In the final three verses of the longer version recited by Abū Mikhnaf, Ibn Hammām writes about Mukhtār and Ibn al-Ḥanafiyya:

> But the helper of the son of the [Prophet's] legatee[22] was gracious to them[23]
> and was the best intercessor for them among the people.
> Right guidance [*hudan*] indeed returned to its seat, most rightly returning
> and coming back
> to the Hāshimī,[24] the rightly guiding by whom one is rightly guided [*al-muhtadī al-muhtadā bihi*];
> him we hear and obey. (Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*:638, l. 5–10; *History*:222)

The Arabic words that I have set within brackets come from the root *h-d-y*; that is, the same root as the word '*mahdī*'. In this poem, then, the word *al-mahdī* is not used; instead, other forms of the root *h-d-y* are employed. Furthermore, in the last verse Ibn al-Ḥanafiyya is the subject of the active participle, '*al-muhtadī*', whereas the subject of the passive participle, '*al-muhtadā*', is the believer.[25] In other words, the verses depict the relation between Ibn al-Ḥanafiyya and the believer, not that between him and God (as is implied in the passive participle of the first

21 On ʿAbdallāh b. Hammām, see El-Achèche (2003); Pellat (1960).

22 'The helper' (Ar. *wazīr*) i.e. Mukhtār in his function as the helper of Ibn al-Hanafiyya, who is here described as the son of ʿAlī, 'the legatee' of the Prophet.

23 I.e. to the governor of Kufa and his companions, who Mukhtār and his men had ousted, but not killed.

24 The clan of the Prophet Muḥammad and all his relatives, including Ibn al-Ḥanafiyya.

25 Both these are participles of the eighth verbal form.

CC BY SA

verbal form, *al-mahdī*). In spite of this, the poem gives further indication that the concept of guidance was important during the activities of Mukhtār. Together with the many references to the use of '*al-mahdī*' in various contexts, both in Abū Mikhnaf's and in the account of Ibn Saʿd, this is a strong indication that Mukhtār actually referred to Ibn al-Ḥanafiyya as *al-mahdī*.

The next question, then, is what Mukhtār and his companions meant by this title. There is in fact very little in the words ascribed to Mukhtār and his companions in the texts that indicate that they regarded Ibn al-Ḥanafiyya as a messianic redeemer. The only passage in the sources where Mukhtār purportedly uses phrases that can be interpreted in this direction is transmitted by Abū Mikhnaf. He relates Mukhtār's early propaganda to win over the Shīʿites of Kufa to his side:

> I have come to you from him who is in authority, the source of virtue, the legatee of the Legatee, and the Imām the Mahdi, with an authority in which there is restoration of health, *removal of the covering*, fighting against the enemies, and fulfilment of favors... Listen to what I say and obey my command, and then rejoice and *spread the good news*. (Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*:534, l. 9–11; *History*:120, slightly amended)

Arjomand quotes parts of this passage (1998:250), and, like him, I have italicised the phrases that he regards as having a particularly apocalyptic tinge. I agree with him that these clauses can (and perhaps should) be interpreted in an eschatological sense, but as I have already mentioned, they are the only statements which describe the *mahdī* and the mission he has given to Mukhtār in such terms. In addition to this passage, there is a curious incident related by Ibn Saʿd in which Mukhtār ascribes supernatural (although not necessarily messianic) qualities to Ibn al-Ḥanafiyya as the *mahdī*. This is supposed to have occurred when the latter was harassed in Mecca by Ibn al-Zubayr, who wanted a pledge of allegiance from him. We are told that Ibn al-Ḥanafiyya considered leaving the hostile situation and going to the more friendly Kufa. Mukhtār did not like this:

> [Ibn al-Ḥanafiyya's] coming was bothersome for [Mukhtār], and he said: 'In *al-mahdī* there is a sign [*ʿalāma*]. He will come to this town of yours [i.e. Kufa] and in the market place a man will strike him with a sword, but it will not harm him or make a mark on him'. Ibn al-Ḥanafiyya came to know about this and he stayed [where he was]. (Ibn Saʿd, *Tabaqāt*:V, 74, l. 12–15, my translation)

According to this text, Mukhtār spread the word that Ibn al-Ḥanafiyya was invulnerable and that this was a sign of his being the *mahdī*. But he also prophesied that someone would test this if Ibn al-Ḥanafiyya came to Kufa. In this way, Mukhtār frightened Ibn al-Ḥanafiyya off from coming and putting his life at risk. As related by Ibn Saʿd, the incident is thus a ruse by Mukhtār to keep Ibn al-Ḥanafiyya at arm's length. Should it be accepted as historical, it would show that the idea of a *mahdī* with superhuman qualities was not alien to Mukhtār and his followers. This is how al-Qadi (1974:124) interprets it, while Dixon (1971:58) and Anthony (2012:259–260) seem to leave the question of its historicity open. None of these scholars argue for their standpoint, though, and personally I see no reason to accept it as genuine (see also Margoliouth, 1919:5–6).

These two isolated traditions are the only overt examples in the sources of any kind of messianic or superhuman traits attributed to Ibn al-Ḥanafiyya by Mukhtār. This does not entirely preclude the possibility that Mukhtār used the term *al-mahdī* in a messianic sense, of course. Arguments from silence are always perilous, and based on the limited evidence we have in this case it is impossible to make categorical statements on this issue in any direction. My main argument in the present study is that the texts available to us do not support the rather bold statements of the scholars I have referred to above, that Mukhtār gave the term a messianic and apocalyptic meaning. Going a step further, it seems to me that the role of an eschatological redeemer was reserved for ʿAlī, who to my knowledge was never called *al-mahdī* at the time

CC BY SA

discussed here.[26] This title was used for his son Ibn al-Ḥanafiyya, about whose messianic status the sources investigated in this study are silent.[27]

A methodological rather than an historical problem

Although the texts under consideration say nothing about the messianic role of Ibn al-Ḥanafiyya, apocalyptic ideas were prolific in Kufa, in particular in the group around Mukhtār, as noted above. The notion of the son of ʿAlī as some kind of messianic figure cannot have ben far-fetched, and it certainly gained ground in the Kaysāniyya movement as this developed after the death of Mukhtār (Anthony, 2012:290–311; 2013; al-Qadi, 1974:235–238). So what makes it so important to argue that we cannot be sure that Mukhtār himself used the term *al-mahdī* in this sense, when only a few years after him it was demonstrably employed that way? Many other questions regarding the early history of Islam which are considerably more important are left unanswered for lack of enough sources, or because the sources available to us have not been properly studied, so why bother about such a minor issue? To me, rather than being a matter of historical accuracy, this is a methodological issue that points to the need to be strict in method and not to reproduce statements and ideas adduced by earlier scholars without argument.

Several of the scholars on early Islam mentioned above apply criteria similar to those used here in their research on Mukhtār and his times.

[26] As I mention elsewhere (2018 [forthcoming]), the only place where ʿAlī is called *al-mahdī*, in the story of the Penitents (Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*:546, l. 11), is probably later. I plan to discuss this in more detail in a coming publication.

[27] As I have indicated above, according to Islamic sources the title *al-mahdī* was apparently used for the prophet Muḥammad in his lifetime or at least soon after. Likewise, in Syriac texts from the seventh century, words cognate with *mahdī* were used when talking of him (see Amir-Moezzi, 2016:33–35, I am grateful to one of my anonymous reviewers who alerted me to this article; see also Brock, 1982:14). Furthermore, in some early non-Islamic texts the Prophet is described in messianic terms (Amir-Moezzi, 2016:33–34). As Amir-Moezzi demonstrates, however, Muḥammad was never regarded as the Messiah by his followers (2016:33–41). Hence, the messianic content of these Syriac words alone cannot be taken as an argument that the term *al-mahdī* had a messianic content prior to Mukhtār.

So, for example, Sean Anthony (2012) has made an excellent and critical investigation of the Shīʿite movement of the Sabaʾiyya, which probably had great influence on many adherents of Mukhtār and perhaps also on the man himself. Fred M. Donner's convincing study, mentioned in a footnote above (2010), contests both the traditional and the scholarly consensus that the word *islām* was used as a label for the new religion already from the time of Muḥammad, and that *muslim* was immediately used to designate the adherents of this religion. That eminent scholars such as these make a methodological slip and uncritically state that Mukhtār used the term *al-mahdī* in a messianic sense must, I think, be attributed to the relative lack of historical importance of the issue. Had it been a matter of higher dignity, it would have attracted more attention and painstaking research, just like the words 'Islam' and 'Muslim', and the Sabaʾiyya movement. It is impossible for a researcher to check every statement one makes in the sources. We all have to build on previous scholars' research, as I do in much of what is written here. Nevertheless, it does become problematic when facts that are demonstrably incorrect are reproduced uncritically.

Most probably, the present study is not methodologically flawless. Should anyone find it worthwhile to challenge my conclusions, there are doubtless several points where it can be criticised. Yet my hope is that it is a contribution towards a more correct understanding of the development of early Shīʿism and the meaning of the concept of *al-mahdī* in this process.

Literature

Amir-Moezzi, Mohammad Ali 2014. 'Reflections on the Expression *dīn ʿAlī*: The Origins of the Shiʿi Faith'. In Farhad Daftary, & Gurdofarid Miskinzoda, eds. *The Study of Shiʿi Islam*: *History*, *Theology and Law*. I. B. Tauris, London, 17–46.

Amir-Moezzi, Mohammad Ali 2016. 'Muḥammad le Paraclet et ʿAlī le Messie: nouvelles remarques sur les origines de l'islam et de l'imamologie shiʾite'. In, Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi et al. eds.

CC BY SA

L'Ésoterisme shiʿite, ses racines et ses prolongements = Shiʿi esotericism: its roots and developments. Brepols, Turnhout, 19–54.

Anthony, Sean W. 2012. *The Caliph and the Heretic: Ibn Sabaʾ and the Origins of Shīʿism*. Brill, Leiden.

Anthony, Sean W. 2013. 'Kaysāniya'. In *Encyclopaedia Iranica*. Advance online publication. http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/kaysaniya. Accessed on 17 November, 2016.

Arjomand, Saïd Amir 1998. 'Islamic Apocalypticism in the Classic Period'. In Bernard McGinn, John Joseph Collins, & Stephen J. Stein, eds. *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism*. Continuum, New York, 238–283.

Brock, Sebastian 1982. 'Syriac Views of Emergent Islam'. In G. H. A. Juynboll, ed. *Studies on the First Century of Islamic Society*. Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale, 9–21.

Conrad, Lawrence I. 2015. 'Ibn Aʿtham and His History'. *Al-ʿUṣūr al-Wusṭā: The Journal of Middle East Medievalists* 23: 87–125. http://islamichistorycommons.org/mem/al-usur-al-wusta-volume-23-2015/ Accessed on 26 January, 2016.

Crone, Patricia 2004. *Medieval Islamic Political Thought*. Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh.

Crone, Patricia, Cook, Michael 1977. *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Crone, Patricia, Hinds, Martin 1986. *God's Caliph: Religious Authority in the first Centuries of Islam*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Al-Dīnawarī, Abū Ḥanīfa 1888–1912. *Al-akhbār al-ṭiwāl*, ed. Vladimir Guirgass, & Ignace Kratchkovsky. Brill, Leiden.

Dixon, Abd al-Ameer Abd 1971. *The Umayyad Caliphate, 65–86/684–705* (*A Political Study*). Luzac, London.

Donner, Fred M. 1998. *Narratives of Islamic Origins: The Beginnings of Islamic Historical Writing*. Darwin, Princeton N.J.

Donner, Fred M. 2000. 'La question du messianisme dans l'islam primitif.' *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée*

[online edition], 91–94 (July): 17–28. http://remmm.revues.org/246. Accessed on 5 February, 2013.
Donner, Fred M. 2010. *Muhammad and the Believers at the Origins of Islam*. Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.
El-Achèche, Taïeb 2003. *La poésie šiʿite des origines au III:e siècle de l'Hégire*. Presses de l'Ifpo, Damascus.
van Ess, Josef 1991–1997. *Theologie und Gesellschaft im 2. und 3. Jahrhundert Hidschra*: *eine Geschichte des religiösen Denkens im frühen Islam*. de Gruyter, Berlin.
Gilliot, Claude 2012. 'Le débat contemporain sur l'islam des origines'. In Thierry Bianquis, Pierre Guichard, & Mathieu Tillier, eds. *Les débuts du monde musulman* (*VIIe – Xe siècle*): *De Muhammad aux dynasties autonomes*. Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 355–371.
Goldziher, Ignaz 1981. *Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law*. Princeton University Press, Princeton.
Hawting, Gerald R. 2000. *The First Dynasty of Islam*: *The Umayyad Caliphate AD 661–750*, 2nd ed. Routledge, London.
Ibn Saʿd, Abū ʿAbdallāh Muḥammad 1904–1908. *Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt al-Kabīr*. Eduard Sachau, ed. Brill, Leiden.
Izutsu, Toshihiko 2002. *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qurʾān*, 2nd ed. McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal & Kingston.
Leder, Stefan 1992. 'The Literary Use of the *Khabar*: A Basic Form of Historical Writing'. In Averil Cameron, & Lawrence I. Conrad, eds. *The Byzantine and Islamic Near East*. *Vol*. *I*, *Problems in the Literary Source Material*. Darwin, Princeton, N.J., 277–315.
Lindstedt, Ilkka 2017. 'Sources for the Biography of the Historian Ibn Aʿtham al-Kūfī'. *Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta* 254: 299–309.
Madelung, Wilferd. 1986. 'Al-Mahdī'. In C. E. Bosworth et al. eds. *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Second Edition, vol 5, Brill, Leiden.
Margoliouth, D. S. 1919. *On Mahdis and Mahdiism*, London.
Meier, John P. 1991. *A Marginal Jew*: *Rethinking the Historical Jesus*. *Vol*. *1*, *The Roots of the Problem and the Person*. Yale University Press, New Haven.

CC BY SA

Motzki, Harald 1991. 'The *Muṣannaf* of ʿAbd al-Razzāq al-Sanʿānī as a Source of Authentic *Aḥādīth* of the First Century A. H'. *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 50/1: 1–21.

Noth, Albrecht and Conrad, Lawrence I. 1994. *The Early Arabic Historical Tradition*: *A Source-Critical Study*. Darwin, Princeton, N.J.

Pellat, Charles. 1960. ''ʿAbd Allāh b. Hammām al-Salūlī'. In H. A. R. Gibb et al. eds. *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Second Edition, vol 1. Brill, Leiden.

Al-Qadi, Wadad 1974. *Al-Kaysānīya fī ʾl-tārīkh wa-ʾl-adab*. Dār al-Thaqāfa, Beirut.

Al-Qadi, Wadad 1976. 'The Development of the Term Ghulāt in Muslim Literature with Special Reference to the Kaysāniyya'. In Albert Dietrich, ed. *Akten des VII. Kongresses für Arabistik und Islamwissenschaft*: *Göttingen*, *15. bis 22. August 1974*. Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen, 295–319.

Robinson, Chase F. 2003. *Islamic Historiography*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Robinson, Chase F. 2005. *Abd al-Malik*. Oneworld, Oxford.

Sachedina, Abdulaziz 1981. *Islamic Messianism*: *The Idea of Mahdism in Twelver Shi'ism*. State University of New York Press, Albany.

Schoeler, Gregor 2011. *The Biography of Muḥammad*: *Nature and Authenticity*. Routledge, London.

Shoemaker, Stephen J. 2012. *The Death of a Prophet*: *The End of Muhammad's Life and the Beginnings of Islam*. University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia.

al-Ṭabarī, Muḥammad b. Jarīr 1879–1901. *Tārīkh al-rusul wa-l-mulūk*, ser. II. M. J. de Goeje et al. eds., eds. Brill, Leiden.

al-Ṭabarī, Muḥammad b. Jarīr 1989. *The History of al-Ṭabarī. Vol. XX*: *The Collapse of Sufyānid Authority and the Coming of the Marwānids*. Gerald R. Hawting, ed. and trans. State University of New York Press, Albany.

Tucker, William F. 2008. *Mahdis and Millenarians*: *Shīʿite Extremists in Early Muslim Iraq*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

CC BY SA

Abstract

The concept of *al-mahdī* is an important theological idea in Shīʿism, its literary meaning being 'the rightly guided'. In Twelver Shīʿism it has come to denote the hidden Imam who will one day return to redeem his followers and restore justice on Earth, and in that sense it is akin to the Christian idea of the Messiah. Among scholars of early Islam there is near-consensus on the view that the transition of meaning from its literal meaning 'the rightly guided' to an eschatological redeemer occurred with the Shīʿite rebel leader al-Mukhtār b. Abī ʿUbayd (d. 686), when he applied it to Muḥammad b. al-Ḥanafiyya, the son of ʿAlī. In the present study I contest that view. I hold that while it can be established from the sources that Mukhtār probably spoke of Ibn al-Ḥanafiyya as *al-mahdī*, they do not support his use of this title in a messianic sense. This eschatological meaning can only be verified soon after his death. Finally, I argue that this question is methodologically rather than historically significant.

Keywords: Islam, Shīʿa, Mukhtār, mahdī, eschatology